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ABSTRACT

"Highlights" magazine receives approximately 75,000 letters and contributions each year from young readers. Common concerns children write about include getting along with family members and friends, problems at school, and social and personal problems. Only a tiny percentage write of grave problems such as abuse, suicide, or drugs. Frequently letters concern teasing and other unkind behaviors by friends and classmates, with teasing by classmates being the largest school-related concern. Other school-related concerns involve problems understanding schoolwork or keeping up with the class, classmates who talk in class and distract others from their work, disruptive class members who cause the entire class to lose privileges, and --rarely--difficulties getting along with the teacher or complaints about teacher behavior. Each letter received is answered, and the "Highlights" staff relies very much on parents, teachers, and other adults to be sensitive and responsive listeners to children who may contact them. Children writing about personal and social concerns evidently know their shortcomings but find it difficult to change long-established behaviors and do think and care about "adult" issues, even though research indicates that parents do not think of their children as having such concerns. (RH)

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My Best Friend Hates Me . . .

and other concerns of childhood

Catherine Johnson

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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You've had the chance as you came in to read a few of the letters readers send us. I'd like to share with you just a little of another one.

"I needed a person to talk to, somebody who understands children. I have read the answers you give to other children's letters and you seem to understand children well. That is partly the reason I am writing to you. The other reason is that if I talked to anyone here, they wouldn't pay any attention. I hope that you are not too busy to write me a reply."

She goes on--in four pages--to talk about her problems getting along with her parents, the time she pretended to run away from home, her hobby of collecting notepads, how much she loves horses, and the questions she sometimes wonders about.

"I have wondered about many things. Such as: How big is space? Are we a small, black dot in a larger and more complicated place? How was GOD created? He created us, but who/how was he created? How long are humans going to survive/live on earth? Did you ever wondered about these things?"

That gives you some hint, I think, of the kind of relationship our readers develop with HIGHLIGHTS. They seem to think of us as a special friend and confidant, and we try to be that for them as much as we can.

We receive massive quantities of mail from our readers--in the neighborhood of 75,000 letters and contributions each year. Every one of those letters is answered. Many are poems, drawings, stories, or other creative efforts submitted for Our Own Pages, the children's contribution section of the magazine. Those are acknowledged with a personalized form letter. Many more are just friendly letters telling

us how much they like HIGHLIGHTS.

"Dear Hights,

I like what you are doing. I think you are doing a great job. If I had a chance to meet you, you'd be my best friend."

But about 5000 of those letters each year are from readers who want help or advice with their problems.

Some of their letters make us smile, or even laugh out loud.

"Dear Editor,

I want to be in a movie or mini-series!! I always begin to dance or sing whenever a car comes by hoping it's a famous director, but it never is. How can I become famous or at least have a chance at it?"

"WORRIED (About Boys)

I'm having trouble with boys. None of them will talk to me anymore, and one time Justin Rambo (a boy in my class) liked me for 4 1/2 days and then just dropped me for one of my best friends. What should I do?"

"Dear Editor,

I have a problem. I have a boyfriend named Scott but he does like me a little but he likes my best friend Gina better. Like the time I went up to buy something in the cafeteria he did not go up there well he did but when he got half way he went back to the table. When Gina went up there he went up there and didn't even buy anything. Can you tell me what to do?"

Some of them charm us with their powers of expressions.

"I have a big problem. Two boys, Dave and Greg, are always giving me love notes. One told me I was cute. There always after me. They just won't seem to leave me alone! So today, October 25, 1985, I gave up. I tried to teach them how to jumprope. Forget it. Teaching boys how to jump rope is like trying to teach a car how to swim! What should I

do?"

"Singing

I have a problem about singing in front of everybody. I get so shy that I feel like I have dinasours in my stomach. What should I do?"

A few of them make us weep.

"One of my deerest friends over-dosed herself with special pills. Thank the lord she didn't succeed in killing herself but I don't know if I should talk about it to my parents, or if I should leave it that 3 people have already told some teachers and just forget about it. What should I do?"

I suspect that in presenting this material here today I am preaching to a converted audience. But I wanted to share with you what are the common concerns that children write about, and to persuade you that only by taking those common concerns seriously are we going to be available to youngsters when they really need an adult they can trust. Let me suggest to you, too, that many of the most common concerns are ones that we as teachers and caring adults ought to be taking seriously anyway.

Youngsters write to us most frequently about problems in getting along with family members (about one-third of all the letters we receive) and getting along with their friends (about one-third again). The third largest group of concerns (about one-fifth of the total) relates to problems at school, followed by personal concerns--what they should be when they grow up, how to stop biting their nails, how much they dislike practicing the piano--and social concerns--pollution, animal welfare, prejudice, famine, missing children, nuclear disarmament. Only a tiny percentage, I am glad to report, fall into the category of abuse, suicide, drugs, or other such grave personal problems.

About one sixth, or sixteen percent, of all the letters we receive concern teasing and other unkind behaviors by friends and classmates.

"To the Editor

I have a friend who is always making jokes about me. If they were funny jokes I would laugh, but they make me feel bad. What should I do?"

"Dear The Editor,

I have a friend that always gets teased. Four people are doing this. They are doing this because he is adopted. I try to save him, but I am afraid to. All of them are fifth graders and I am a fourth grader. What can I do to save him?"

"A Girl

There's this girl in our school who's Dad has been in the hospital sick. The other kids say 'Don't touch the wall, bugs have been on it." I like to play with her at recess but others say I'm ignorant. I'll be sick forever. But I like her and want to play with her. I don't want to be made fun of. What should I do?"

In fact, teasing by classmates is the single largest concern relating to the school setting. No doubt you are all aware that teasing, name-calling, bullying, and tormenting do take place in the classroom, in the hallways, on the playground, every time the teacher's back is turned. What adults often fail to recognize, I fear, is just how deeply even such everyday teasing and tormenting is felt in childrens' lives. For a few children, such schoolyard bullying escalates to much more alarming proportions.

"To the Editor

I have a problem. On my way to school some kids beat me up and take my money and don't bring it back. What should I do?"

Our advice to that child--and to any child facing physical danger--is

to confide in an adult--a teacher, a parent, the school counselor, any adult he feels comfortable with. The sad thing is that this method of dealing with the problem has occurred to so few of these children on their own as a viable solution. Part of the reason that they reach out to us, of course, is that it's always easier to talk about your problems to a stranger. Part of it is the social code to which they subscribe against tattling or "ratting." Part of it, though, is that many kids have no reason to believe that teachers, school counselors, or even parents will really listen and do anything anyway. Clearly any parent, teacher, or other responsible adult would do something about a child being beaten up and robbed on the way to school. But what the child has seen is that many of them won't do anything about name-calling, shoving, tripping, and other more subtle forms of abuse from their peers.

The other major concern children write about, which constitutes about the same proportion of our total, deals with fighting and arguing among friends or among siblings. Most of the situations they write about are undoubtedly familiar to most of you: friendship triangles in which one child has two friends who don't like each other, or one friend is jealous of the time spent with another, or a child is worried that someone else is trying to "steal" her best friend, or friends who get along fine one-on-one but seem to always fight when all three of them get together. Youngsters write about younger brothers or sisters who hang around and bug them, who get into their stuff, and who insist on being included when friends come over. They write about older siblilngs who tease and pick on them and leave them out when friends come over. Or they write about fighting and wrangling with siblings of any age. Our standard reply to all those situations is that a certain amount of conflict is normal in any family or

friendship, but the way to minimize it is to control your temper, to work at improving your own behavior, and to talk things through with the other person involved.

Some of the other concerns they write about relative to their school experience include problems understanding their work or keeping up with the class, classmates who talk in class and distract them from their work, disruptive class members who cause the entire class to lose privileges (a practice most of our letter-writers complain is grossly unfair), and--rarely--difficulties getting along with the teacher or complaints about teacher behavior. Mostly these writers want very much to please the teacher and do well in school. And our advice is freuqently to talk with the teacher during recess or after school hours. We tell them, "Your teacher wants you to do well and succeed at school. If you let your teacher know you really want to do better, I am sure he or she will help." We hope that it's true.

In fact, we rely very much on you--as parents, teachers, and other adults--to be sensitive and responsive listeners. The response that these youngsters are looking for, by the way, is either a solution or some specific advice to help with their problem, not just a sympathetic ear. When youngsters write that they can't concentrate in class because another child is bothering them, we often suggest that if the child really can't ignore it, then the best thing to do is explain the problem to the teacher. When they write about getting pushed or hit, we tell them "whenever anyone is being physically hurt or threatened, an adult should know about it." When they write about conflicts between independence and parental control, we tell them, "explain to your parents how you feel. Listen to their side, too." And certainly whenever we are faced with a situation which even hints of

child abuse, drug use, or suicidal behavior, we tell them to talk to any adult they trust and feel comfortable with--a parent, a member of the clergy, a teacher. All we can do in most cases is hope that the child takes that advice and that the adult she or he picks really is one the child--and we--can rely on.

Before we break up, let me touch just briefly on those smaller categories of personal concerns and social concerns. These are not insignificant numbers, despite being small in terms of percentages. We're are still talking about several hundred letters each year about what we have classified as personal concerns and a hundred or more relating to larger social concerns. And I think it is worth spending some time on, because these letters remind us of some other frequently forgotten truths about kids.

First is that youngsters really want to be good and to do well. They want to please their parents. They want to succeed in their schoolwork. They want to cut down on junk food or watch less TV or conquer thumbsucking. They recognize that they have habits and attitudes and behaviors that need improving, and they write asking for help and advise to do just that. We frequently feel, I think, that our admonitions to youngsters "go in one ear and out the other." They don't though. Kids know their short-comings, but it's not always easy to act on that knowledge--to break bad habits, to change long-established behaviors. Linda P. from Ohio wrote us a letter not too long ago which illustrates this rather well. She titled it "Attitude."

"Attitude

Some people in my class say I'm a grouch. That really makes me boil, even though it's true. Even Anna, my best friend, says I have a hot

temper. Sometimes my teacher tells me to quit griping. What can I do to change my attitude?"

She knows she's got a problem, even though she doesn't like to hear about it. What she doesn't know is how to change it.

The second thing worth remembering is that youngsters do think about and care about "adult" issues. They want to know what they personally can do about starving children, litter and pollution, cruelty to animals, greed. Just before I left the office yesterday, I came across this letter from a ten-year-old.

"Dear Highlights,

I want my article in your Letter to the Editor. I am very mad about greed. It seems that the world doesn't care for fun or good things like that. Why can't people slow down and look at our world. It's becoming awful. There are other things than money. How can I help this greed to stop."

Youngsters need adults to take their thoughts about these issues seriously and to honor them for being concerned citizens of our nation and our world. In a 1983 survey of adolescents and their parents, the researchers found that among fifth graders (the youngest age they surveyed) issues such as hunger and poverty, violence, and nuclear war ranked high among their worries. But these were issues that few of the parents listed as being important to their youngsters. The letters we receive confirm that they are important to youngsters, even much younger than fifth grade. And youngsters deserve to receive thoughtful responses to their concerns about these issues.

Which brings us full circle to where we began. We do take kids seriously and respond to them thoughtfully, whether they write about the boy who once liked them for 4 1/2 days, about greed in the world,

or about their friend's unsuccessful attempt at suicide. And it is because we take seriously the trauma of a failed romance that they write to us about a failed suicide. We can't be there for the latter if we weren't there for the former.

But in reality, we can't be there at all. The best we can do is to send a letter and hope. You are the ones who really can be there. I am here today to thank you for being there, and to encourage you to continue to be. You're the ones we're telling the kids who write to us to turn to when our letters aren't enough.